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William Austin, or the Tempestuous Supernatural

William Austin was born on 2 March 1778 in Lunenburg, Massachusetts. His family moved then to Charlestown which they had to flee during the blaze which destroyed the town in 1775, while the battle of Bunker Hill was raging. William was the third child of Nathaniel Austin, a prosperous pewterer, and of Margaret Rand, the daughter of Deacon Isaac Rand. Six children were born from their union. The Austin family had settled in America as early as 1651, when Richard Austin emigrated from England.

William Austin graduated from Harvard in 1798, at a time when the teaching there was largely influenced by the Unitarian philosophy. He was in the same class as Stephen Longfellow, the father of the poet. At that time, Austin published a pamphlet of Rousseauistic inspiration against the institution — *Strictures on Harvard University* — which he seemed to have disowned later on. Then he left the United States in 1799 to serve as both chaplain and teacher on board the famous US frigate “Constitution.” The numerous nautical metaphors developed by Austin, as well as his metaphysical preoccupations, seem to be the outcome of this experience.

Later on, William Austin studied Law at London’s Lincoln’s Inn, from 1802 to 1803. There he met William Godwin and the painters

Washington Allston and Heinrich Füssli; the latter, then curator of the Royal Academy, was already well-known as the creator of the *Nightmare*,¹ many copies of which were then circulating throughout Europe. In 1804, Austin published his *Letters from London*, a work which gathered the written transcription of his interviews with various London prominent figures, together with his personal comments on the British institutions and Law. This work of republican inspiration, was received quite critically by the American Federalists, although it gained durable success among New England jurists.

Austin came back to Charlestown in 1803. His talents as a jurist gained him a reputation in the whole of Massachusetts. He befriended political figures as prominent as Alexander Hamilton and Daniel Webster. His biographers insist on his straightforward commitment and tempestuous character, which led him to fight a duel in March 1822, in Rhodes Island. In 1807, he published an essay of Unitarian inspiration, entitled *The Human Character of Jesus Christ*. The same year, he married Charlotte Williams who died in 1820. In October 1822, he married Lucy Jones. Austin fathered fourteen children with his two wives.

All his life, Austin was a fervent Democrat-Republican (anti-federalist). His mother was an ardent Tory, considering Bunker Hill as a defeat, while his father was a devoted Patriot. Austin never considered himself a professional writer. His biographies — rare and often written in a somewhat hagiographic tone — insist on his refusal to be paid for his fictions. Besides his juristic activities, William Austin led a political career: as an abolitionist and a Jeffersonian Republican (whereas his brother Nathaniel was a Federalist), he actively participated in the management of the city of Charlestown where his family was born.

¹ The artist, obsessed by the mythical scene of an incubus taking advantage of a *virgo dormiens*, painted several versions of his *Nightmare*, while his work was largely copied and reproduced all over Europe. The first painting of that series, was exhibited as early as 1782, and is today to be seen in Detroit. In 1790, the painter presented a second work, the inverted replica of the original, otherwise hardly modified. As early as the end of the 18th century, Füssli was famous for his disquieting supernatural paintings.

After its destruction during the War of Independence by a blaze, Charlestown underwent a rapid rebirth after the building in 1786 of a tall wooden bridge — known as the Charlestown Bridge — which was considered the biggest bridge in the world at the time. Austin was clearly marked by the administrative, financial and human issues induced by the building of that remarkable structure: when, having become a prominent figure of Charlestown, Austin started writing his fictions, he made the crossing of the Charlestown Bridge the central locus of his best two short stories, “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” (1824-1827) and “Martha Gardner” (1837), *i.e.* his first and his last pieces of fiction.

Austin was elected five times as the delegate of his city in the General Court of Massachusetts, between 1811 and 1834. He also represented Middlesex County in the Senate of Massachusetts during the 1820 Convention then in charge of the redrafting of the State Constitution.

Joseph A. Zimbalatti, the author of the first critical edition of “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man,”² suggested that Austin’s literary production pertains to the religious context of the very Bostonian conflict between Calvinists and Unitarians in the 1830s, remarking that he published his pieces of literature after he had officially admitted his membership to the Unitarian Church of Charlestown, in 1815. His grandson, Walter Austin, relates in his biography that following the December 1815 crisis in the Congregationalist Church of Reverend Jedidiah Morse, Austin, like his brothers Nathaniel and David, immediately joined the new Unitarian Church, adding that his wife and children were also faithful members (Walter Austin 182-83, quoted by Zimbalatti). For Zimbalatti, this was convincing evidence that William

² See more particularly: “Austin and Unitarian Literature” (134 *et passim*). The Unitarians chose to use literature to convey their liberal ethics, breaking with Puritan austerity. See Lawrence Buell, “The Literary Significance of the Unitarian Movement” in *American Unitarianism, 1805-1865* (1989). The basics of the biographical data presented in these lines come from J. A. Zimbalatti’s study and of Walter Austin’s *William Austin: the Creator of Peter Rugg: Being a Biographical Sketch of the Author, Together with the Best of his Short Stories*.

Austin was inspired by the Unitarian theology then prevailing in Boston, all the more so given that his short stories visibly belonged to the Unitarian literature spreading in New England in the early 19th century. Seen from that angle, they could be read as anti-Calvinist allegories.³

Austin died in Charlestown on 27 June 1841. He wrote his fictions in the later part of his life, between 1824 and 1837. His literary work consists of six short stories, three of which pertaining, at various degrees, to the supernatural genre: “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” (*New England Galaxy*, 10 September 1824; 1 September 1826; 19 January 1827); “The Man with the Cloaks: a Vermont Legend” (*American Monthly Magazine*, January 1836); and “Martha Gardner; or Moral Reaction” (*American Monthly Magazine*, December 1837).

Only his first fiction, “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man,” was an immediate and durable popular success, so that its eponymous hero eventually became, beside Washington Irving’s Rip Van Winkle, one of the mythical figures of early American literature. The rest of his production — among which a fragment of a play, inspired by Hesiod and Homer — rapidly fell into oblivion. If many Americans are familiar with the story of Peter Rugg, a close relative of Rip Van Winkle, few know that he was created by William Austin. That is probably why Walter Austin, the author’s grandson, made a point of specifying in his 1925 anthology that William Austin was the author of “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man.”

Indeed, if the short story has become a national legend — many times reedited since in the United States —, the name of the author is almost lost: it is most unusual to find a note on William Austin in the American dictionaries of literature or other literary studies, even in the best documented ones. Austin is today an American “missing writer” who no longer has a place in his homeland’s literary history.

³ However seminal it may sound, Zimbalatti’s thesis seems somewhat restricted as the author fails to analyze the place of the Revolution in “Peter Rugg,” or the rewriting of European legends — as those of the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, and the cursed traveler; neither does he establish any link between the Austinian corpus and the supernatural genre.

The present issue of *Alizés* gathers all of Austin's short stories, except "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" to which a special number has already been dedicated. The five narratives first published between 1825 and 1837 are presented here as they appeared in the original publications; so far overshadowed by the celebrity of "Peter Rugg," they have never been rehabilitated by a fully dedicated edition, nor by any extensive scholarly reading.

A lexical skimming through the texts presented in this issue reveals Austin's recurrent insistence on his favorite themes. The word "bridge" appears some thirty times in his five short stories, "dream" twenty times, "storm" eighteen times, "Boston" fourteen times, "spirit" eleven times, "tempest" "eight times"... These five narratives pertain to a specific literary corpus and convey, beyond the originality of each of them, recurrent textual knots which were already present in the author's seminal narrative "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man": the city of Boston, a disturbing dreamlike quality, the thunderstorm, the bridge over the river, money as the absolute value of the new post-revolutionary society, the revenant...

Moralism and a propensity to religious allegories — in conformity with the tradition of the sketch in New England — are also essential elements of Austin's literary world. His social satire based on numerous hints at the local political life had no doubt an eye-opening function for the reader of those days, but it sounds often too opaquely coded for today's audience, although it undoubtedly roots Austin's fiction into the society of his day.

In this paper, we would like to analyze these five short stories in order to highlight for the first time the textual structural elements of the whole imaginary literary world of William Austin. We will try to make apparent their lexical and semantic networks as well as the central place of "Peter Rugg" in this textual constellation. However, one must first admit that there is no fiction as dense and as elaborated as "Peter Rugg" in this corpus forgotten since the beginning of the nineteenth century: this mythical short story was the both the first attempt and the

masterpiece of the author, unmatched in the sequel of Austin's literary career.



“The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster” was published in 1825, between the first and the second episode of “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man.” Joseph Zimbalatti had already underlined that the two years separating the writing of the first two sections of the short story let us suppose that Austin had not scheduled any sequel to his narrative of 1824. He suggests that only the massive popular success of this fiction had encouraged him to writing a sequel to it. As a matter of fact, the other two episodes were published within four months. The publication of “The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster” between two sections of “Peter Rugg” seems to corroborate this hypothesis.

Because of the date of its publication, this piece of fiction invites more than any other to compare it with the first and most famous of Austin's narratives. While “Peter Rugg” — under the signature of the fictitious penname of Jonathan Dunwell — is confirmed as a real popular success, Austin, who has probably already begun to think of a sequel to his tale, publishes his second short story in the same Bostonian magazine. If “Peter Rugg” suggests a comparison with Washington Irving's “Rip Van Winkle,” “The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster” calls to mind, though being obviously less elaborate, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”⁴ The common elements are numerous: the bulimic, scrawny schoolmaster; a torpid country; the conflict between the intellectual elite and economic powers, the situation comedy verging on the grotesque... The story narrates how a young scholar was hired for a pittance as a country schoolmaster in a desolate remote country; there he underwent for two long months humiliation and extreme starvation, so that when he eventually went back home, his family mistook him for a ghost.

⁴ See, in this issue, Alain Geoffroy's “The Legend of ‘Stingy Hollow’.”

The narrative, awkwardly written in places and lacking rhythm, pertains both to a speech for the defense of young intellectuals in a mercantile society in which scholars are already scorned, and to the country farce: the schoolmaster was hired for \$15 a month, after he had explicitly been put up for auction like slaves used to be: "although born of white parents, I was at noon day, publicly sold at auction" (17). His rustic hosts starve him to death so that he starts to behave like an animal: he chases every rodent around to swallow it voraciously and verges on becoming a cannibal.

The return home of the schoolmaster obliquely evokes Peter Rugg's; although the former can actually reach his home, he appears in the form of a flying specter: "[I was reduced] to such a gossamer, that Zephyr would have blown me about at pleasure" (31) and "the hyppogriff could not have overtaken me" (31), an even more frightening vision than Peter Rugg himself.



"The Late Joseph Natterstrom" was published in 1831, four years after the last episode of "Peter Rugg." Although the tremendous success of "Peter Rugg" should have stimulated Austin's inspiration, these four unproductive years seem to suggest that creative writing was no regular or essential activity for the jurist of Charlestown.

The narrative tells how Beg and Hamet, two Turkish merchants, tried the proverbial honesty of Joseph Natterstrom of New York. Beg disguised himself as a ragged old man and, meeting him in the street, he stealthily entrusted him with a bag of coins and vanished. Natterstrom devoted himself to investing the stranger's money into thriving businesses, although he had no news of him for some thirty years. When Beg eventually came back to try the New Yorker's honesty and asked him for his possessions, he observed that the flourishing properties of Natterstrom were in fact his own; but the latter straightforwardly yielded the whole property of the Turk to his strange visitor and found himself ruined overnight. Beg then organized mock funerals,

spreading false reports of his death, so that Natterstrom could inherit the fortune to which he had dedicated his life, though it actually was that of a total stranger. Here again, money, like in the two preceding narratives, is the central theme of the story.

A few interesting elements are to be noticed here. First of all, the implied reference to Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*: the two Turks call to mind the two Persians, Rica and Usbeck, of the French philosopher. When Beg and Hamet arrive in the United States, they critically comment upon the New World society in the guise of their neutral position and natural curiosity as foreigners, not unlike Montesquieu's two Persians criticizing Louis XIV's society:

I perceive this is a very young country, but a very old people (39) . . . a people not really civilized, yet far from savage ; not very good, nor altogether bad ; not generally intelligent, nor altogether ignorant ; a calculating people, who reckoned up their rights as often as they did their money (39) . . . a people without any apparent government. (39)

However, Austin's narrative fails to reach the depth and the impertinence of the picture of manners drawn up by Montesquieu's Persians visiting Paris. Their comments do not even match the Bostonian auctioneer's speech in "Peter Rugg," nor the corrosive look of Peter Rugg himself as, when, eventually back from colonial times, he sees the United States as a frightening apparition. If Austin's narrative process is quite similar to Montesquieu's "Persian standpoint," the former makes obviously here a too restricted use of it.

One can observe also that, not unlike Peter Rugg, Joseph Natterstrom confesses that "for thirty years, he had been under a supernatural influence" (48). But whereas Rugg's curse lasts for a generation — he is eventually redeemed by Dunwell who exchanges his obsolete coin for dollars —, Natterstrom seems to be blessed by the gods as Beg's heaven-sent sum of money allows him to build an immense fortune. Here the short story verges on the supernatural: indeed, Beg disguised as a old tramp suddenly materializes in the dead of night with a bag full of five hundred English guineas which he holds up to Natterstrom before vanishing with these words: "Occupy till Ebn Beg comes" (42). When

Beg eventually reappears, he is depicted as “a miserable object, so unhuman, that the horses tremble at his sight” (47). The narrative evokes here, though it soon turns away from it, some devilish agreement: one thinks, for instance, of Washington Irving’s “The Devil and Tom Walker” — published a few months before Austin’s tale. But the origin of Natterstrom’s fortune owns nothing to the Devil: it is only a very human ordeal, the consequence of a rich Muslim’s whim to try a New Yorker’s honesty. The story shuns the supernatural to become an edifying narrative.

Moreover, Beg’s inquiry to find Joseph Natterstrom — a character as famous as he is invisible, so that he is held for a ghost or some mythical creation — echoes Dunwell’s investigations on Peter Rugg. It is only at the term of a quite similar inquiry — no doubt the first one in American literature — that Dunwell succeeds in establishing that Peter Rugg is not a mere legend and that he survives beyond collective memory.



Austin’s reader had to wait three more years for his next narrative, “The Origin of Chemistry.” The story is quite bewildering: the narrator, visiting London in 1793, was staying in a hotel room in which stood an imposing statue “of a late Lord Mayor, in the rear of which a very slender man might, if he pleased, enclose himself” (53). No sooner said than done: the narrator then “was constrained to be a silent auditor and spectator” (53) of a conversation between three gentlemen who had unexpectedly entered the room thinking it was unoccupied. His childish “whim” enabled him to overhear the disquieting details of a worldwide conspiracy: cynically and sometimes devilishly, the Frenchman, the Englishman and the American plan the curse of the planet at the turn of the century, paving the way to war, plague and famine. Of all the available sciences likely to lead mankind to its loss, chemistry, the “modern” science *par excellence*, seemed to them the most appropriate. The three “superhuman” conspirators foresee a worldwide epidemic that

medical science could not halt and which would gradually poison the whole world.

The narrative obviously lacks substantial elaboration and sounds more like the “germ” of a short story than a polished fiction. One fails to grasp the nature and design of the narrative which conveys the double phantasm of a general conspiracy against mankind and of the spreading of evil on a worldwide scale by diabolical beings. However, the author’s moralism prevails over the fictitious as the devilish dimension of the protagonists fails to be exploited fully in a very discursive narrative.



The penultimate short story of the author, “The Man with the Cloaks: a Vermont Legend” was published two years later. This narrative is, second after “Peter Rugg,” the most supernatural of Austin’s fictions, despite its latent allegoric tone. Moreover, its writing appears to be more formal and elaborate than that of the four stories previously presented here.

Austin staged his story by the shores of Lake Champlain; the lordly landscape depicted echoes of Irving’s splendid scenery in “Rip Van Winkle” and that of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” The story is that of John Grindall, a rich miserly man who, in winter 1780, bought a new coat and refused to yield his old one to a mysterious traveler who was chilled to the bone. To Grindall’s cynical refusal, the traveler replies: “sir, if you make money your god, it will plague you like the devil. . . . Farewell, then. You may want more than two cloaks to keep you warm if I perish with the cold” (66). The imprecation sounds like a classical *topos* of the supernatural genre: indeed, as soon as the news of the traveler’s death is spread, Grindall is *caught* by the cold, like Peter Rugg has become the victim of the thunderstorm he has defied.

Grindall then buys cloak after cloak which he piles up on himself, without easing the supernatural chill which has taken its grip on

him: “all availed nothing ; he grew colder every day. Every new cloak was but a wreath of snow” (67). In spring, he has no less than seventy cloaks on him. Not unlike Peter Rugg who disregards the malediction of Heaven so that he keeps on “thundering” at the toll-gatherers — thus deferring his redemption —, Grindall maintains his avaricious and arrogant attitude. In July, he wears more than two hundred cloaks, thus becoming a local curiosity and people begin to think of Grindall as “what the Scotch call a doomed man ” (70). At this point, the sufferings and the solitude of the literally stone-cold man explicitly echo Rugg’s malediction, and the two narratives — though separated by ten years — appear to be intimately interwoven:⁵

“O wretched Grindall ! I am an outcast from human nature. There is no human being to sympathise with me. All forsake me. I am alone in the world ; at home, without a home ; in the world, but not of it. More than an outcast.” (70)

Although he stays at home, Grindall undergoes the twofold experience of dereliction and alienation, like Peter Rugg, the outcast, who “will never see home” (*Rugg* 52) and “can never be fitted to the present” (*Ibid.*). Wrapped in his three hundred and sixty-five cloaks, Grindall can no longer move because of his volume: confined in his own home, he no longer *lives* in it: the narrative here wavers from the grotesque to the supernatural.

Grindall’s lot literally echoes Maupassant’s famous supernatural story, *Le Horla*: though he stays in his home (here, in French: *là*), he gradually becomes an encysted alien thing (being “out” of mankind, in French: *hors* — he is both “here” (*là*) and “out of here” (*hors-là*). He is a parasite of his home, something which grows in it, alien and yet familiar: he is the literary embodiment of Freud’s *unheimlich*.⁶

⁵ For an extensive comparative analysis of the two short stories, see *supra* Alain Geoffroy’s “‘The Man with the Cloaks’ or the Moral Rewriting of ‘Peter Rugg.’”

⁶ Translated from the German by “the uncanny.” Literally, what both belongs to the home (*heimlich*) and looks alien to it (prefix *un*).

Following the tradition of the supernatural genre, Grindall transgresses the Christian moral code (avarice, lack of charity, homicide, failure to render assistance to a person in danger) and his supernatural retribution logically parallels his sin. Not unlike Rugg's punishment, Grindall's borrows from meteorological phenomena: "I am equally exposed to fire and frost" (77), the chilled protagonist exclaims in his cloud of "warm vapour" and "surrounded with beautiful rainbows" (76). However, Grindall, unlike Rugg, eventually learns the lesson of Heaven, when, one year later, the mysterious traveller, supposedly deceased, appears to him "like one risen from his grave" (71). The heavenly messenger teaches him, at the term of his one-year ordeal, that he should rather warm his heart than his body. It is not his body which is ill, but his soul, and only by robbing (or disrobing) himself to pay his fellow sufferer can he recover some *ardour*.

The hero then devotes himself to distributing his cloaks until he no longer possesses any but one. However, it turned out to be quite a business, for when fine weather came back, nobody wanted to receive a cloak any more, even for free. Indeed, giving is still difficult for Grindall, which indicates that the divine ordeal continues. In fact, the cloaks seem to be endowed with some supernatural life, which proves that they are less simple garments than the instruments of a divine plan:

Immediately preceding the divesting of a cloak, the cloak would appear to be animated with life. It would first tremble, then crinkle, and then dance all around the body of Grindall. It would seem joyful, almost intelligent, and inclined to speak. It did not shrivel, or show any sign of distress. Not a few asserted all this was accompanied by a noise not unlike the rumbling of distant thunder. But the moment the cloak was put off, it was as quiet as lamb's wool. No wonder it began to be noised abroad that there was an evil spirit in each cloak. (78)

The brewing thunderstorm is another hint at "Peter Rugg" for whom thunder is less a meteorological phenomenon than the instrument used by Heaven to punish him for his pride: the peals of thunder coming *closer* bring both narratives *closer* through the theme of the malediction. More generally — and this is still true of "Martha Gardner" —, the thunderstorm in Austin's fictions is the sign of God's wrath. The

extreme cold for Grindall is the equivalent of the storm for Peter Rugg, and it testifies one more time to the meteorological dimension of Austin's supernatural.

As a matter of fact, Peter Rugg, who has to face foul weather and refuses to settle all payments (the curse precisely consists in Rugg's blindness to repeated opportunities of redemption), is a forerunner of Grindall, which makes Austin's description of Rugg on board the Hudson ferry all the more interesting:

He had on three pairs of small clothes, called in former days of simplicity, breeches, not much the worse for wear; but time had proved the fabric, and shrunk each of them more than other, so that they discovered at the knees, their different qualities and colours. His several waistcoats, the flaps of all which rested on his knees, gave him an appearance rather corpulent. His capacious drab coat would supply the stuff for half a dozen modern ones. (*Rugg* 43)

In fact, Austin's deep interest for the hero's style of clothing in these two fictions seems to be less relevant of his taste for fashion than of his metaphysical concerns.

The cloak is a very strong religious symbol: indeed, Elijah seized prophet Elisea by wrapping him into his cloak, a symbol of the power which "God's spirit" had given him; Saint Martin cut his coat in two and gave one half to a pauper. From a philosophical standpoint, the cloak means a withdrawal within oneself and in God; consequently, the multiplication of the cloaks symbolizes the loss of the inner fire — of "the heart," as the supernatural messenger put it in Austin's short story — and the remoteness of God's light.

Both Rugg and Grindall have numerous clothes, but they have no heart. Basically, they conceal in them an essential void: something hard, insensitive and cold, which makes them "distant;" which is not so much hidden but revealed by their superfluous clothes. A "voluminous" void appears which can never make up for the "distance," nor for the insensitiveness. Rugg and Grindall are *left cold* by the rest of the world, even if the rumor said that Rugg's fiery fits of passion "will swell [his]

veins and expand [his] head” (*Rugg* 28), or if Grindall is “equally exposed to fire and frost. . . . At one moment [he is] threatened with a deluge; at the next with a conflagration” (77). These variations of temperature are not natural, they constitute a symbolic theophany and their role in the fiction is that of a barometer of the soul.

The superimposition of the two protagonists’ cloaks — verging on the grotesque for Grindall, who becomes successively a snowball, a sauna, and an incubator — paradoxically unveils their inner deserts, far from God’s light and warmth: they experience a frigidity of the soul. Their hypertrophied appearance and extreme behavior — Rugg and Grindall gesticulate, thunder, curse and make exhibitions of themselves — reveal that they suffer from an atrophy of their humaneness and of their inner life.

When Grindall takes off his last cloak, he feels both relieved from the burden of his faults and warm-hearted to his fellow men: the mysterious traveler comes back to preach at him not unlike the *vox populi*, *vox dei* of the excipit of “Peter Rugg”: “Mr. Grindall, if you desire never to want another cloak, keep a warm heart” (79); in other words, what covers his heart is an obstacle to God’s light and he ought to have his heart “in the right place,” *i. e.* free of anything that might cover it and, by putting it beyond God’s light, will make it cold. So is it for his material possessions, accumulated for the selfish pleasure of mere undivided ownership: they form a tight fence around him and cause the freezing of his heart.

At the beginning of the narrative, the protagonist who mixes up “to give and to lose” (65) shields himself behind his two cloaks, fearing only one would not *cover* him sufficiently against always possible misfortunes. Quite logically, Heaven punishes him by *covering* him with too many cloaks and Grindall *discovers* that the cold which has overcome him comes not only from his *being safe* but from his *safe* as well. As his capital is as one with him, this not very homely skinflint literally *inflates* so much that his home can no longer contain him: Grindall himself becomes a huge *immovable* property. However, his inflation is unable to make up for the flatness of his emotional life.

Grindall's three hundred and sixty-five cloaks symbolize the chain which binds him to the Canadian traveler who supposedly died of cold. Being frozen stiff himself, Grindall has to *break the ice* and accept to give one after one all the cloaks he bought, before he can become, on a fine summer day, a man who no longer needs to live *under cover*. Undoubtedly, Austin's fiction questions here *under the cloak* what being rich implies — morally and materially — in nineteenth-century America.

Grindall's chilling story is that of a man who is taught a lesson by a Canadian traveler who was freezing cold and supposedly died of it. The pertinence of his lecture is relevantly based on cold logic: the fiery Grindall is given time *to cool down*, confined in his own home by the three hundred and sixty-five cloaks, until he realizes that he would have to give up his cloaks one after one to recover his integrity. By renouncing what he so dearly paid for to have cover against the cold, Grindall literally breaks the ice with the rest of the world and eventually, on a fine summer day, turns out to be an open-minded man, who from then on can live *without cover*.



William Austin's last short story was published four years before he died. "Martha Gardner; or Moral Reaction" is a narrative clearly pertaining to the supernatural genre because of the pivotal places of both the theophanic thunderstorm and the malediction supposedly weighing on the Charles River Bridge. It is precisely for that reason that Austin's ultimate fiction echoes his very first one, "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man."

The story appears as both a "public report" and a "legendary tale" tinged with "marvellous" elements (85). The narrative tells about Martha Gardner's strength of purpose in front of the Charles River Bridge Corporation's will to expropriate her. Martha's former home was razed to the ground during the battle of Bunker Hill, and a new one had been built on the bank of the Charles River, near the ferry line that used

to link Charlestown to Boston before the erection of the tall wooden bridge in 1785. The site is historical: the great waves of Puritan immigrants of the 1630's settled there, and decisive battles took place nearby during the Revolution.

The corporation has designs on Martha's estate for it is adjacent to the bridge itself. Old Martha should then resign herself to accepting for the second time the destruction of her home — and this in time of peace! — for the sole purpose of expanding the propriety of the Charles River Bridge Corporation...

Martha not only bridges two centuries — she died in 1809 — but also two types of society — colonial, revolutionary America, then the United States — and even two cities — Charlestown and Boston. She literally *bridges* two worlds: in that sense, her imperiled home — as a metonymic landing stage between the two banks of the Charles River — appears as a symbolic passing from one historical period to another, presented here more as a painful uprooting from the past — and the promotion of litigation — than as a liberating revolution.

Not unlike Peter Rugg, Martha seems to be condemned to moving for she is confronted with that same devilish Charles River Bridge whose existence was denied by Rugg. Indeed, “the affair of the Charlestown Bridge” (*Rugg* 29) takes up the last lines of the first section: according to the toll-gatherer, Rugg, in his ghost chair, haunts the bridge regularly at midnight, refusing to pay tolls, protesting there is no bridge between Charlestown and Boston, but a ferry.

Rugg's *ghost* bridge is *spirited* in by Austin into Martha's story, as though “Peter Rugg” were back in “Martha Gardner”: in other words, a text *appears* in another text, generating an intertextual effect. The Charles River Bridge is thus less the Devil's than Rugg's bridge, the protagonist being called up here obliquely, barred, banned and in-between.

The judicial conflict opposing Martha to the corporation is a true nightmare for the unfortunate woman, soon about to resign herself to living in wandering: but is she really able to hold out against her

opponents, like the insurgents did against the British troops in Bunker Hill? Unfortunately, to stand up to the judicial persecutions of a big American business means an unequal struggle. After the Revolution, the destruction of Martha's house is still on the agenda: Austin's fictional issue is quite a cutting one, especially for a jurist and a politician: the question is, does the building of a new modern society necessarily imply the destruction of the old one?

To comfort Martha, a Mr. Wood reminds her that the selectmen of Charlestown — here Austin pays an ironical tribute to his fellow counselors — had decided to tear off the wooden post — on which the name of Ebenezer Mansir was carved ⁷ — which she had always seen outside her window until they threw it off into the river. But the pole eventually came back to its “post-hole” after a two year trip around the world. Martha evokes this remarkable pole — with a name, an identification — in the following terms:

“the return of the wooden post was like a lost angel to his native home . . . a wandering spirit might one day reach its native home ! . . . it seemed like the return of a wandering spirit” (86)

This ghostly post wanders on the high seas like the Flying Dutchman before going back to its home port. This sounds like a direct allusion at Peter Rugg, the Wandering Dutchman,⁸ seen as far as Cape Horn, whose open chair is recurrently compared with a ghost ship sailing off Boston. The wandering post, miraculously back to its point of departure, near the Charles River Bridge, echoes Peter Rugg's peregrinations: the eternal return of the post, of a text, of Peter Rugg. This implicit reference constitutes an interesting intertextual effect, pertaining to a literary genealogy within a specific corpus; it fosters a “loop” effect between the first and the last of Austin's fictions: they meet again before the Charles River Bridge.

⁷ A Hebrew name indeed: *Eben-Ha-Ezer* means “salvation stone,” *i.e.* a toponym in the Bible. The post is sacred, its uprooting a profanation.

⁸ We write the *Wandering Dutchman*, for “Peter Rugg” mixes the legend of the Flying Dutchman and that of the Wandering Jew. For a systematic analysis of the legendary sources of “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man,” see Bernard Terramorsi, *Le mauvais rêve américain*.

The loop is looped, to say that things go round in circles but also to ward off a catastrophe: when Rugg eventually reaches home after fifty years of wanderings, he sees that his estate is about to be sold at auction and his house in ruins: “sure enough our house is burnt, and nothing left but the door stone, and old cedar post” (*Rugg* 51). The door stone and the old wooden post only remain as the basic symbols of his uprooting, as the *genius loci*. The story of Peter Rugg, the Bostonian, comes down to and in “Martha Gardner,” but the ending had to be revised: how about the return of this American Ulysses to his intact home of Ithaca. The question is, should Martha’s house be destroyed like Peter Rugg’s?

The post actually did not come back all by itself. Indeed, Martha had previously called down curses on her aggressors’ heads: “Who knows but that post may one day come back again, to convince the Select-men of my right and their wrong ?” (87) Like Peter Rugg, the post comes back to challenge an unfair ruling of the court. Peter Rugg’s return puts an end to land speculation, and beyond that, to the destruction of historical Boston, thus preserving the collective memory of the United States. Martha’s sentence enables us, *in return*, to interpret the denouement of “Peter Rugg” differently: if the Wandering Dutchman is eventually allowed to go back home, it is not only due to Dunwell’s financial gesture,⁹ but because he makes *publicly* appear the auctioneer and the speculators to be in the wrong. Similarly, Martha’s post, identified with her home, comes back to dispense justice. Both Rugg and the post are the instruments of divine justice, which prevails over that of men when the latter is no longer *moral*.

Basing our interpretation on the intertext bridging the two fictions, we can assert that Martha’s ghost pole, the reflection of the “dejected” Rugg (*Rugg* 20), is *rejected* into a fluctuating medium, but comes back so that the judicial and political “drift” reaches its *term*. Rugg’s house was in Middle Street, and Martha lives *in-between* Charlestown and Boston in a “frontier cottage” (83) by “the dock adjoining the bridge” (85). Martha bodily resists both the evil *pons* (bridge) and the corpora-

⁹ As we have already demonstrated in Bernard Terramorsi, *Le mauvais rêve américain*.

tion — *jus corporationis pontificans*. For in Charlestown, *she* is the *pontifex* as she personifies the revolutionary history of the city, its destruction and rebirth. She literally *bridges* the old and the new worlds, without excluding anybody by keeping the past alive: her house is attached to the post, like Ebenezer's boat used to be, and even herself in her youth: "from her youth upwards she was attached to that . . . Martha, when a child played in the boat, and when it floated on an ebb tide down the dock the length of its tether, she sailed up the dock by the help of the rope. That was a pure pleasure never to be forgotten" (86). A signpost with a name, torn off from inside and back from the outside, like a wandering bollard, both a point of departure and a point of arrival, the umbilical cord between water and earth: Martha's root.

The wooden post signals Martha's house and symbolizes her home: it overdetermines the fundamentally deep-rooted character of her abode. In fact, Martha is attached to her post like the post is attached to the Charlestown bank. Overlooking the river whose waters flow by under the bridge like Time itself, the post — still here in spite of everything — symbolizes stability, deep-rootedness, in contrast with the unsteady, the fluid. The post is what gives Martha her roots. She wants to be buried here, in the same soil.

But where does Martha, the genuine Charlestownian actually live? On a border, where the old ferry used to berth and land its passengers, precisely where the new wooden bridge allows today's travellers to walk across the river. Martha lives in the *terminus*. Having reached the *term* of her existence, Martha no longer wants to move again, but the summons of the corporation's justice prevent her from resting in peace, and the earth from swallowing her serenely. The post, thrown into the water — and back two years later —, is like a signpost for Martha, indicating the *term* of her life, both spatially and temporally. A *term* is originally a statue of Terminus, the god of the limits and of the immutable. Indeed, when Mr. Wood appears — bringing with him the episode of the old wooden post — Martha is sitting in her chair "looking to heaven more like a figure of stone than a living being" (85). Having reached the terminus of her life, Martha no longer wants to move: she embodies Terminus, the Latin divinity of the immovability of the limits,

of the unchangeableness of the frontiers. The waters may run under the bridge and the corporation foam with anger, Martha will not move: she just stands there, like an antique *term* — after all, Homer is explicitly evoked by Austin —, facing the modern monument designed to facilitate the fluidity of the traffic.

Four years later, Austin reaches the term of his life, like Martha. With his last short story, he also reaches the term of his literary career. His ultimate — testimonial — piece of fiction borrows from his very first one — the “old cedar post” of Peter Rugg’s burnt house — and goes one step further: “Martha Gardner” thus appears as the fourth section of “Peter Rugg,” staging the triumph of moral reaction over the Charles River Bridge corporation: Martha literally pips the corporation at the post...

“Martha Gardner” is based on the opposite pairs of the moving and the steady, of modernism and tradition, of false and true seers *pontificans*. Martha faces the corporation, like the wooden post had faced the ever changing waves, but when she looks at the post, she can see her own roots: by so doing, she makes all movements reach their *term*, and beyond that, she puts an end to the wanderings of the “lost angel,” of the “wandering soul,” of Peter Rugg.

“A benighted traveller has been often shown his true path by a flash of lightning” (87), Martha said. However, unlike Peter Rugg, she is assisted by the wooden post, first flouted and rejected, then allowed to come back and dispense justice. Lightning led Peter Rugg, the revenant, on the road to ruin, but for Martha, it is a divine illumination. The malediction is over, thus making “Martha Gardner” appear as the sequel and the real denouement — *term* — of “Peter Rugg.”

Like her predecessor’s, Martha’s inner turmoil eventually generates major meteorological disturbances: her nightmares, her fits of anguish, her revolt, all of them announce the whirlwind to come, what the ancient Greeks called *salos*, the unleashed waters, the turbulence of the seas, and the disorder of the soul. “You may yet awake out of a dream” (87), Mr Wood said. But unlike Peter Rugg, who could not

dissipate his bad dream in which the United States looked like a frightening apparition to him, Martha manages to put an end to her nightmare. The angel behind the curtain *enlightens* her by revealing where her deeds were buried, thus *bridging* the past and the present, which Peter Rugg never managed to do completely. She finds her deeds again — “a jewel” — like she found her ghost post again — “an emerald”: significantly, these gems testify to the value of the tellurian — steadiness — , in contrast with the aquatic — fluidity.

When the corporation went back onto the offensive, Martha “in her phantom sleep, . . . wrestled with the night-mare in the shape of the Great Corporation ” (90). But the nightmare has changed: it no longer stages the revenant of the bridge — Peter Rugg — but the Charles River Bridge itself. Once persecuted by the thunderstorm, Rugg was redeemed by Dunwell *and* by the defeat of the speculators, and reincarnated as Martha, he triggers off this time a saving tempest:

Charles River Bridge next disappeared, and was totally engulfed. Vessels might have sailed over it keel-safe. The flood was marching up Main Street to the square. Mothers seized their infants, and were preparing to fly to the uplands. (91)

The Flood and the Last Judgement put an end to the litigious initiatives of the corporation. Martha is within her rights when she said: “I will neither fly from the storm” (91). Having taken over from Peter Rugg — the “old wooden post” is passed from one to the other —, she knows that this tempest is a theophany, and that the first move must come from her opponents. The tempest is now *with* Martha ¹⁰ as it was *against* Rugg. She cannot be condemned to wandering by Heaven for the very earthly local powers have already done so, spurning all morality and enforcing ready-made laws favoring land speculators.

“I am above the storm” (91); “there shall be no more passing over that Bridge” (92); “It shall be like a barren spot in a fertile valley” (92): Martha’s second imprecation was also heard literally. Heaven supports

¹⁰ By invoking the storm, Martha begs the favor of Heaven: she is what the supernatural tradition calls a “cloud leader,” a “tempester.”

Martha and, with her, the people of limited means thrown out of their homes by unscrupulous authorities. The tempest is no longer of devilish but of divine origin. Here is the expected sequel of “Peter Rugg,” the beneficial and moral outcome of Rugg’s vindictive return, for at length, Martha’s prophecy came true: the Warren Bridge became a serious competitor for the Charles River Bridge soon no longer used, which Peter Rugg had already foreseen in his own way by refusing its existence and “flying” above it.

Moreover, we know that Austin’s family had to leave Charlestown during the battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775. Undoubtedly, this last short story echoes a family drama which must have traumatized William Austin retrospectively for *he* was actually born in Lunenburg three years later. For mysterious reasons which cannot probably be totally deciphered, the politician and jurist of Charlestown was struck by the building of the Charlestown Bridge in 1785, which he stages in his best two fictions, “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man” and “Martha Gardner.” However, the autobiographical sides of the two narratives do not in the least hamper their literary working out: though deeply rooted into a political context mostly forgotten nowadays, “Martha Gardner” is a remarkable literary piece which deserves all our attention. Indeed, the inclusion of history into this fiction does not prevent the unfolding of a whole symbolic world whose major elements are linked, as we have seen, with the mythical “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man.”

By his resorting to the supernatural — the premonition in the dream, the theophanic storm, the ghost post —, Austin emancipates his narrative from plain ordinary facts, staging, for the reader’s pleasure, a substitutive way to the resolutions of conflicts. Creative writing was apparently, for the jurist of Charlestown, an oblique means of expression — a transgression — allowing him to bypass the impediments of official or political communication. For literature is a way out to all aporetic, political situations: it allows what the official means of expression censor when they have become nothing more than a mechanically signifying *doxa*.



Austin's supernatural, in "Peter Rugg," "The Man with the Cloaks" and "Martha Gardner" is first of all a meteorological supernatural, inspired by puritan demonology and the seminal work of the Bostonian Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692), obliquely mentioned in "Peter Rugg." In these fictions, we are indeed confronted with a meteorological supernatural — clouds, thunderstorms, strong winds, squalls — in other words, with a "supernature" controlled by Heaven.

The supernatural pertains to fluids, fractal figures, and whirling currents. So it is no wonder if American literature and supernatural begin with a thunderstorm in the Catskill Mountains in "Rip Van Winkle," with tempests in "Peter Rugg" and "Martha Gardner," and with an unusual temperature drop in "The Man with the Cloaks." *In the beginning was the (atmospheric) disturbance*, a metaphoric expression of the confrontation of heavenly powers and earthly political or economic interests (the Revolution, the big corporation, etc.). Paradoxically, Austin uses the disturbance, the storm, as the only firm ground for him to express his point of view. His storms actually make up for an impossible representation: that of the storm itself, seen from within. Consistently, American literature originates from texts of the chaos which are also chaotic texts: black specks, black clouds, lightning, and unleashed waves. A seminal speck from which a nebulous, tempestuous writing was born.

At the origin of American literature, the Austinian disturbance symbolizes the elementary of the original tempest, the formlessness: logically, the meteorological text comes recurrently across the black cloud or speck (*Rugg*). This indivisible speck — *i. e.* resistant to analysis — represents both what is impossible to be seen, and what lets nothing filter through. In the beginning was the supernatural narrative of the speck: the elementary atom, the irreducible remainder of reading and even thinking, a remainder of heavenly nature...

The supernatural is *taraxical*, troublesome and perturbed: the appearance of this unpacified and unpacifiable material implies a return of and to chaos. Austin, the nebulous author of “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man,” endeavored to write this chaos and to build a bridge toward the third bank of the river.

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